



## Early Griffith: A Wider View

William Johnson

*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 3. (Spring, 1976), pp. 2-13.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28197621%2929%3A3%3C2%3AEGAWV%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>

*Film Quarterly* is currently published by University of California Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

WILLIAM JOHNSON

## Early Griffith: A Wider View

To celebrate the centennial of D. W. Griffith's birth, the Museum of Modern Art in New York last year held multiple showings of about 100 of the films he made for Biograph between 1908 and 1913. This was an unprecedented opportunity to follow the development of the film-maker who is universally credited with having turned a toy into a form of art. Previously, only scholars with access to such archives as the Library of Congress could have reviewed so great a quantity of his early work, and many of the films in the MOMA selection would have been new even to them. Other film enthusiasts were unlikely to have seen more than 15 of the Biograph films.

In his first five crucial years as a film-maker, Griffith produced about 450 one- and two-reelers. The percentage of these that has been seen, studied and analyzed in depth is extremely small.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, his later films have been much more accessible. Of the 25 extant from *Birth of a Nation* through *The Struggle*, all except three have had public showings before this year, and some have been screened many times. Consequently, critical assessments of Griffith have been based far more on his later work than on his formative years, and most assumptions about him reflect the same unbalance.

Here are some of the prevailing assumptions<sup>2</sup> about Griffith and his work:

1. He developed cinematic techniques that were only embryonic in earlier film-makers and integrated them progressively into the basic narrative syntax of film that remains to this day.
2. He made his most original contributions to film narrative in the field of editing, especially in cross-cutting, and most of all in creating the suspense of last-minute rescues.
3. Most of the content of his films cannot be taken seriously. Not only did he rely on the kind of melodrama and sentimentality that was already outdated on the stage, but he displayed the

attitudes of a sexist, a racist and a Victorian prude. These drawbacks do not prevent him from being considered the greatest American film-maker.

4. His major achievements are found in the longer films made after 1913. The earlier one- and two-reelers are of interest chiefly in showing the stages by which he attained that later mastery.

The MOMA centennial program makes it both necessary and possible to reexamine those assumptions. The hundred films that were shown amount to nearly one fourth of Griffith's early output—a sample quite large enough to be representative.<sup>3</sup> And what they represent turned out to contain several surprises. As I viewed the new films along with those I had seen before, I found the prevailing assumptions continually being challenged. While the general outlines remain valid, the emphasis has changed and some of the inconsistencies have dissolved away. The major adjustments concern assumptions 3 (content and attitudes) and 4 (the relative importance of the short and long films). It will be easier to discuss these after looking at the more concrete areas of assumption 1 and 2.

### 1

In assimilating and developing the use of such techniques as camera movement and distinctive camera angles, Griffith did not by any means travel in a straight line from simplicity to complexity. His first film, *The Adventures of Dollie* (July 1908<sup>4</sup>), contains a striking high-angle shot of a field of tall grasses and bushes: a man is scything the grass at frame right; the Gypsy, carrying the kidnapped Dollie, rushes in from the top of the frame, moves toward the scyther and

then veers away, exiting at bottom; the Father and another man enter at top and make inquiries of the scyther; then all three exit at bottom. Although Griffith's later films contain more panoramic and more exciting high-angle shots, they do not extend the basic principles which already apply in *Dollie*—the effective novelty of a different angle amid a series of “normal” shots, and the revelation of dramatic spatial relationships which would emerge far less clearly at ground level.

In *Dollie*, too, Griffith is already making use of the possibility—far greater in the film than on the stage—of showing action in depth (a subject moving directly or obliquely along the lens axis). In *The Barbarian*, *Ingomar* (October 1908) he is already bringing part of the action right up close to the lens. Again, later examples are more dramatic—including the notable scene in *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (October 1912) where the gang leader approaches until his face dominates the left of the frame—but they are scarcely any more extensive or complex.

Griffith's use of one major camera technique appears to have *diminished*, both in frequency and amplitude, during the Biograph years. This

*Griffith's skill in editing goes far beyond his notorious cross-cutting for suspense. Here's a startling cut (with 180° shift of camera angle) from The Fugitive (1910). The Confederate soldier's sister skips up to the house with a newspaper announcing a Southern victory (left) and then stops short on seeing his dead body (right). [All stills in this article from Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.]*



is the pan shot. In 1908 and 1909 there are two breathtaking examples of panning which seem closer to the continuous-shooting experiments of the fifties and after than to the dawn of the film narrative—and it is the earlier example which is the more complex. In *The Call of the Wild* (October 1908; photographed by Arthur Marvin) a lengthy pan to the right is followed (in the same shot) by a lengthy pan to the left, while the action involves entrances, exits and re-entrances by four characters and a horse (plus a probably accidental dog). *The Country Doctor* (July 1909) begins with a deliberate 180-degree pan across a rural valley, leading up to the front of a house; then (in the same shot) the door opens and the doctor, his wife and daughter come out. The film ends with the same 180-degree pan in the reverse direction. But of the MOMA films made after *The Country Doctor*, very few show even minor panning movements of the camera, let alone the sweep of those two early examples.<sup>5</sup>

An obvious explanation for this decline of the pan shot would be Griffith's increasing absorption in editing; rather than pan from one scene to another, he came to prefer a cut. But this neat theory doesn't fully match the facts. Panning was never a staple of Griffith's earliest films, and the two examples described above are exceptional. In *The Country Doctor*, the pan is reserved for initial and terminal scenes which stand somewhat apart, and it in no way precludes editing in the main action. A more convincing reason why Griffith limited his filmic arsenal will emerge from a study of the second assumption.



## 2

The MOMA selection confirms that despite fluctuations, Griffith's editing became progressively more complex during the Biograph years. There is an increase both in the number of scenes and in their variety—meaning that he was not only breaking down scenes which could have been shot continuously but also doing more and more interweaving of scenes that had no unity of time and space.

The latter kind of editing is, of course, more obviously dramatic. It includes, but is by no means limited to, cross-cutting in the usual sense of the term—that is, alternation between two concurrent lines of action. One of Griffith's most distinctive editing devices is a single direct cut between physically distant scenes in order to stress their contrast or similarity. Well-known examples include the cut from Enoch on his desert island to Annie back home in *Enoch Arden* (June 1911: there is a similar cut in the 1908 version of the same story, *After Many Years*) and between rich and poor in *A Corner in Wheat* (December 1909), but there are also several equally impressive examples in the newly printed films, such as *As It Is In Life* (April 1910), in which the first kiss between the daughter and her boyfriend is followed by a shot of her lonely father turning his head as if aware of what is happening at a distance. Here Griffith has already gone beyond the crude and mechanical kind of contrast which the term "cross-cutting" often suggests and elsewhere he achieves an astonishingly oblique and modern effect. In *The Lady and the Mouse* (April 1913) storekeeper Lionel Barrymore is being nagged by his sister for allowing credit to poor customers when a title, "Boredom and Insincerity," leads abruptly to the elegant grounds of a mansion: a young woman walks smilingly away from an attentive man, and then (in the next shot) kisses another man. Griffith offers no preparation at all for this new setting: from the narrow world of economic struggle he plunges the viewer casually, in mid-action, into the timeless leisure of wealth.

Such varied contrasts play as large a part in Griffith's editing repertoire as the more notorious



Another striking cut, from *The Lady and the Mouse* (1913). The film opens in a village store. The shopkeeper (Lionel Barrymore), at the urging of his daughter (Lillian Gish), lets a poor woman have food without payment, and now (top) is being scolded by his sister (Kate Toncray). After a title, "Boredom and Insincerity," the scene changes abruptly to an elegant garden, where a woman leaves one man (bottom) for an assignment with another.

cross-cutting which leads to a last-minute rescue. In the MOMA selection, no more than 12 films contain a full sequence of this kind, with another ten featuring brief or abortive examples. While this is still a significant proportion, it seems clear that Griffith's use of the last-minute rescue came from one predilection among several rather than from a dominant obsession.

Along with these conspicuous types of editing Griffith also developed cutting for continuity. At a fourth viewing of *The Lonedale Operator* (March 1911) I attempted to note the complete shot breakdown and was astonished to discover that sequences which had given the impression of seamless continuity were actually made up of many brief shots. This is most notable on the several occasions when Blanche Sweet walks the short distance between the depot platform and the telegraph office. Each walk involves at least four shots—the platform, the door of the depot building, the waiting hall and the office—yet Griffith achieves the smooth cutting on action which was later to become a Hollywood fetish. However, it cannot be argued that Griffith shared this fetish, certainly not in his Biograph years. *The Lonedale Operator* contains plenty of “conspicuous” editing, as do many of his other short films. That smoothness for its own sake was not his object is confirmed by his occasional 180-degree reversals of camera angle which make a character who is moving across the frame suddenly appear to change direction. Two such reversals—which I did not notice at a first viewing—occur in *The Fugitive* (November 1910), one of them at a dramatic peak: the Confederate soldier’s sister comes skipping up (left to right) toward her house, entering the front door frame right; cut to the interior of the house with the sister skipping inside right to left, until she stops on seeing the soldier’s dead body. The reversal (no doubt unintentionally) adds to the impact of the abrupt change of mood—which drew a gasp from at least one member of the MOMA audience—and helps to make this brief sequence a fine example of Griffith’s protean editing, both conspicuous and smooth at the same time.

It seems plausible at first to associate his smoothness with the tendency of most early film-makers to show a larger number of transitional scenes than was later considered necessary. The Biograph films are studded throughout with brief and repeated scenes of doorways, halls, gates, alleys, street corners, porches, and the like. These may be located right next to the key settings—like the hallway between Lillian Gish’s

apartment and the bar in *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*—or at an indeterminate distance—like the outbuilding where the two farmhands sleep in *In the Season of Buds* (June 1910)—but in either case the camera setup and the angle at which the characters pass through invariably make the orientation quite clear. Thus the spatial relationships within each cluster of settings, and usually between the different clusters as well, are very solidly established. After a single viewing of, say, *The Lady and the Mouse* it’s possible to draw a diagram not only of the apparent interior layout of Lionel Barrymore’s store building but also of the relative positions of the exterior scenes, even though one of these is introduced by the unprepared cut mentioned earlier.

To some extent, no doubt, Griffith felt that he could allow himself the conspicuous kind of editing—the leaping through space and time—only if he placed the audience on solid ground elsewhere. Yet this practical concern cannot have been the only reason for the clear articulation of his settings. The simplest way to establish links between close locations would be to show two or more of them in a single long shot. But Griffith’s long shots (which are justly praised) hardly ever perform this function. The opening pan in *The Country Doctor* does not include (recognizably, at least) any of the subsequent locations other than the front of the doctor’s house. In *The Honor of His Family* (January 1910), about a Confederate officer who runs away from battle and is shot by his father, two of the key settings are the battle lines and the officer’s home (which is near enough for the father to be watching the action through field glasses). As the officer runs away, Griffith inserts an impressive long shot containing three different planes of action from foreground to extreme background—but no sign of either the main battle lines or the officer’s home.

There is no essential difference between this dramatic long shot and a brief transitional scene of a porch or hallway. Each presents a clear segment of space; the running time of each depends on the complexity of its particular segment. Though repetitious in theory, Griffith’s transitional scenes rarely seem so in fact, because they are succinct, rhythmic, in tune with the

action. It's now possible to see further reasons why Griffith lost interest in the pan shot: the view it offers tends to be blurred and imprecise, and its running time is determined by the speed of panning, which depends on mechanical and optical requirements as much as on the content of the scene. As I hope to show in the next section, for Griffith content was paramount: he set out to film not space but places, not time but events.

### 3

Content is a loose term, since it can apply to the objects and actions within each scene, to the story or plot, and to the theme or ideology of the film. The points at issue concern the two latter areas, in which Griffith is generally held to be at best conventional and unadventurous. However, the three areas overlap, and it would be surprising if a film-maker with a penetrating eye in one of them were purblind in both the others.

Griffith's eye for objects and actions is penetrating indeed. Many examples of what seem to be technical achievements in his work depend largely on his response to content. At the end of *His Mother's Son* (May 1913) the family sits down to a copious meal, of which Griffith shows a mouth-watering close-up. This close-up would not have the same physiological impact—it would, in fact, be gratuitous—if Griffith had not previously shown the father and daughter working for a mean restaurant owner who built up their (and our) frustration by refusing to let them eat on the job. Again and again in his films Griffith obtains an aural or tactile effect through skillful use of content, and invariably the effect is not gratuitous but heightens the drama. Consider the scene in *The Lonedale Operator* introducing the bag which the thieves will later try to steal: as each package is put inside, the man holding the bag lets it sag, thus drawing attention to the weight and value of its contents.

It would be tedious to list enough examples of this kind of scene to prove that their frequency is more than an accident. What is clearly not accidental is Griffith's choice of the physical

settings of his dramas. At first sight, he gravitates toward mere picturesqueness: hilltops, seashores, rivers, woods, deserts, tenements, ballrooms, garden parties, and so on. But the visual interest of his locations is nearly always justified by the drama. The desert with its wind-blown dust in *The Female of the Species* (April 1912) and *Just Gold* (May 1913) enhances the bitter passions of the characters who move across it; in the latter, there is also a vivid contrast with the fertile farm back home and the gentle disposition of the brother who stayed behind. In *The Unchanging Sea* (May 1910), about a fisherman who loses his memory when shipwrecked on a distant shore, the endless rolling of the waves serves both to link the scenes of the fisherman with those of his waiting wife and to embody the passing years which separate them. The most expressive of all the locations I saw in the MOMA films occurs in *As It Is In Life* (April 1910), about a widower who gives up the woman he loves in order to look after his small daughter, who later deserts him for the man she loves. The widower works at a pigeon farm, and there are stunning scenes filled with thousands of pigeons, some flying past the lens in blurry close-ups, others circling as dots in the distance, and the rest flocking in a dense mass in between. But Griffith offers more than a pretty picture. There are repeated scenes of the widower with his daughter—both as a small girl and grown up—pushing a feed cart through the farm. As they move, the flocking pigeons edge away to leave a clear circle of ground around them—and this shifting no-man's-land projects a vivid image of the seeming transience of the widower's life, which contains nothing he can hold onto. Griffith still has more to offer. When the widower proposes to the woman he loves, they are standing by a fence on a hilltop, and pigeons are circling in the distance; it is in this same setting, years later, that the grownup daughter promises never to leave him.

Earlier I showed how Griffith organizes his settings in space; these last scenes from *As It Is In Life* show one of his basic methods of organizing them in time. Of course, there are simple practical reasons why scenes taking place at different diegetic times are shot in the same

location. But as with so many of the possibly fortuitous elements in Griffith's work, this recurrence of settings invariably enhances the drama. At the beginning of *The Informer* (November 1912) young Confederate officers say goodbye to their girls at a "trysting place" overlooking a river; at the end, in the same camera setup, some of the women are there alone, and one officer has an arm missing. In other films, too—such as *The Greaser's Gauntlet* (August 1908), *A Corner in Wheat* and *A Modern Prodigal* (August 1910)—Griffith opens and closes with scenes in the same setting, to underscore and summarize the changes that have taken place in between. The contrast between the same place at two different times may be separated not only by all of the film's main action but also by half of it (the hero of *In the Season of Buds*—June 1910—quarrels with his girl by a stone seat halfway through the film and meets her there, now married to his best friend, at the end), by a small part of it (*As It Is In Life*) or by none at all (at the end of *Just Gold*, Griffith fades out on the body of a dead man and fades in on the skeleton).

If Griffith's plots and situations are largely melodramatic and sentimental (and I will eliminate any further suspense by agreeing that they are), he does not try to mask their nature by isolating them from everyday life.<sup>6</sup> By far the greatest number of his films contain not only real locations but also, in the background yet fully noticeable, all kinds of casual activities. In fact, the second scene of his very first film, *The Adventures of Dollie*, includes two youths walking away along a country lane as Dollie and her Mother approach in the middle ground. It's true that the background action in other films from his first year or so still have the artificiality of stage business: for example, the ballroom scenes in *Call of the Wild* and *The Greaser's Gauntlet*. But by the time of *The Lonely Villa* (June 1909) Griffith has achieved a thoroughly casual touch with the extras chatting in the background of the studio-made inn scene where the Father phones home. Later, of course, Griffith graduates to spectacularly crowded backgrounds, which begin to emerge in such scenes as the cabaret in *The Mothering Heart* (June 1913). But his keen

judgment of the kind of incidental action that will match and enhance the plot can already be found in *The Lonedale Operator*. The film opens with the Engineer and other railroad employees relaxing beside the tracks; a messenger boy bicycles up with a call for the Engineer. In the next scene, Blanche Sweet is standing by a gate further along the tracks; the messenger boy rides up and gestures to show that the Engineer, her boyfriend, is coming; after he exits, a horse-drawn carriage can be seen passing over a grade crossing in the distance. Now, the boy seems to pass through the frame just as casually as the (presumably unstaged) carriage, yet he creates a neat expository link between the two main characters of the melodramatic plot. There is an even more striking—and unusually modern seeming—example of deliberately casual action in *Death's Marathon* (May 1913). Two business partners, played by Henry Walthall and Walter Miller, are in love with the same woman; Walthall, who wins her, turns out to be a compulsive gambler, and one day Miller sees him filching money from the company safe. Now a telegraph boy (Robert Harron) brings a message saying that the company must put up a large sum of cash—and at this high point of the drama, Griffith takes time out to follow Harron as he enters, walks through one office, rests his lighted cigarette on the edge of a desk, passes into the next office, delivers the

*Griffith's Biograph one-reelers abound in simple and effective opening scenes, as in The Crooked Road (1911). A newly married couple move to embrace each other in a tentative manner that clearly foreshadows their disagreement and separation.*



message, walks back through the first office, picks up his cigarette and goes on out. Here, a deft and amusing piece of background action is brought boldly into the foreground.

Whether in foreground or in background, the human gestures in Griffith's films can carry tremendous significance. This is particularly true of opening scenes, many of which present the multiple ramifications of a human situation in a few seconds of running time. *As It Is In Life* opens with the father, wearing a black armband, and his little daughter walking slowly away from the camera toward their home—a scene which could easily dispense with its title, "The Mother is gone." In the first scene of *Brutality* (December 1912) Mae Marsh and a girlfriend are swinging on a country gate like children; then Walter Miller appears, the friend slips away, and Mae Marsh walks with him like a young woman (the next sequence shows their wedding)—years of development in a single scene. Even more compact is the opening of *The Crooked Road* (May 1911), which focuses on a couple in wedding clothes as they look searchingly at each other, move tentatively together, and then kiss—a scene which not only introduces the melodramatic ups and downs of their fictional marriage but embodies the uncertainty of any couple that have just committed themselves to living together.

People do, unquestionably, make up the most important part of Griffith's content. But are they people or just types? In a 15-minute silent film one can hardly expect great subtlety of character; and since Griffith turned out many of his Biograph films at the rate of two a week, he must almost have been obliged to rely on typecasting from among his stock company of players. This, indeed, is what often happened—but there are plenty of exceptions. Henry Walthall sometimes played heroes, often played weak or villainous men, and also would be assigned some mixture of the two, such as the likable thief in *A Change of Spirit* (August 1912) and the suspicious husband in *The One She Loved* (October 1912). Blanche Sweet could portray both the frail innocent in *The Painted Lady* (October 1912) and the resourceful heroine of *The Lonedale Operator*. Charles Mailes could suggest physical differences (beyond makeup) when playing an ingenious crook in

*A Terrible Discovery* (December 1911), a taciturn Mexican in *Fate's Interception* (April 1912), a boneheaded actor in *The Old Actor* (May 1912) and a heavy father in *The Sands Of Dee* (July 1912); and Wilfred Lucas projects a still more striking change between the beefy sailor he plays in *The Primal Call* and his willowy pastor in *Three Sisters* (February 1911). Even a player who usually did conform to the same type was encouraged to illuminate it with subtle touches. Mae Marsh, the vulnerable innocent, was particularly adept at this: in *The Sands Of Dee* an artist who she thinks intends to marry her has asked her to slip out and meet him at night; after she goes to her bedroom, her mother comes to say goodnight—and Mae Marsh, after a brief, almost involuntary glance at the window through which she will climb, embraces her with impulsive and unusual warmth. These actions are effective not as psychological revelations but as rapid flickers of life which extend the scene beyond the simple melodrama of the anecdote.

The question of typing in Griffith's characters involves his social as much as his aesthetic attitudes. Does he present women as inferior creatures—as what Lewis Jacobs calls "the pale, helpless, delicate, slim-bodied heroines of the 19th-century English poets"? Well, Lillian Gish, generally taken to be his typical heroine (though she was a latecomer to Biograph, starting only in 1912), has a challenging quality to her innocence in such films as *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* and *The Lady and the Mouse*; and in *The Mothering Heart* there is an extraordinary scene where she releases her anger by slashing the blossoms off a rose bush. Mary Pickford is active to the point of violence in *The Informer*, *Fate's Interception* and *A Pueblo Legend* (August 1912). Blanche Sweet is a capable working woman in *A Country Cupid* (July 1911) and *The Lonedale Operator*. Even Mae Marsh becomes an active heroine at the end of *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (May 1914; filmed in 1913). In any case, Griffith's leading actresses do not all conform to the same basic physical type. Claire MacDowell, a strong-jawed brunette, makes an impressively forceful heroine in such films as *The Primal Call* and *The Female of the Species*.

Despite all these exceptions, I would agree that



## EARLY GRIFFITH

Griffith reveals an attitude toward women that is basically sexist—as did most film-makers, playwrights and other men at that time.<sup>7</sup> I merely wish to stress that it was not a blind attitude, but enlightened by his eye for reality.

The charge of racism could be passed over here, since it arises most virulently with *Birth of a Nation*. While the Biograph films about the Civil War are full of happy and loyal slaves (played by whites in varying grades of caricature), they do not suggest that blacks are villainous, vicious or stupid. But these portrayals are, to say the least, stereotypes; and the same must be said for Griffith's Chinese and Mexicans—though the latter are allowed some heroism (a Mexican cowboy rides through danger to fetch help in *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch*). As for Indians, while Robert M. Henderson declares<sup>8</sup> that Griffith deserves recognition for his sympathetic portrayals, the evidence points two ways. No other nonwhite group is brought so fully to the foreground as in *A Pueblo Legend*, in which all the characters are Indian; but Mary Pickford, Robert Harron and the rest of the white cast hardly convince the viewer that he or she has entered another culture. On the other hand, while the Indians in *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* provide conventional menace against the white settlers, Griffith does show that their attack arises out of a cultural clash in which they have a thoroughly legitimate grievance. The fact remains that Griffith is at best ethnocentric: blacks, Indians and others are “good” when they help or avoid harming the Anglo-Saxon characters, but are rarely (and in the case of blacks, never) allowed to have their own independent values.

It may seem difficult to reconcile this narrow outlook with Griffith's liberal attitude toward economic distinctions. In films like *A Corner in Wheat* and *The Usurer* (August 1910) he creates tremendous sympathy for the poor by direct cross-cutting between their hardships and the pleasures of the rich—contrasts which still retain their power today, even after the more sophisticated dialectic of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and others. However, Griffith does not damn his characters merely for possessing wealth: they can attain redemption if they become authentically generous toward the poor, as do the rich men of



Griffith's eye for locations could often give depth and subtlety to routine melodramatic plots. In *Just Gold* (1913) the desert with dead mule and windblown dust could have been filmed by Stroheim or Buñuel.

In *The Watches of the Night* (October 1909) and *One Is Business, The Other Crime* (April 1912). Similarly, a criminal who performs a good deed can escape the consequences of his crime—as in *The Miser's Heart* (November 1911) and *A Modern Prodigal*. And it is these escape clauses which point to the resolution of Griffith's apparent inconsistencies. He believes in the importance only of *personal* acts and decisions, not of those dictated from the outside. That is why he can, with equal wholeheartedness, make some films extolling puritanical virtues—such as temperance in *The Drunkard's Reformation* (April 1909) or honesty and hard work in *The Narrow Road* (August 1912)—and others savagely attacking groups which try to impose the same morality—*The Reformers* (August 1913) and *Muggsy's First Sweetheart* (June 1910). The importance which Griffith attaches to personal decisions and relationships accounts at least in part for the most blatant of his ethnocentric attitudes—the white-washing of slavery. In his view, there was a personal bond between master and slave which stood higher than the cold commercial relationship of employer and employee.

Clearly, Griffith's belief in personal salvation entails much naiveté and sentimentality. But these are usually given fresh and unselfconscious expression. Compared to the sophisticated sentimentality of more recent years—all those slow-motion idylls of lovers running through the grass,

or the quick-cut sequences of flawless close-up nudity which sanitize the delightful disarray of sex—many of Griffith's tender scenes survive extraordinarily well. The high-angle shots of Mae Marsh and Robert Harron running along the beach in *The Sands Of Dee* and of Wilfred Lucas and Mary Pickford embracing beneath the willow trees in *Fate's Interception*; Blanche Sweet in *The Lonedale Operator* playfully twisting Frank Grandin's ear when he tries to kiss her; and Lillian Gish in *The Lady and the Mouse* taking Harry Hyde partway behind the door to embrace him—these still communicate surprising vigor, as if Griffith is not merely imposing an effect on his players but also (true to his belief in the personal) drawing it out of them.

Of course, sentimentality will cloy less in individual scenes than in the narrative structure, and Griffith falls back all too often on luck, coincidence or an unlikely change of heart. His endings tend to be either abruptly happy or pleasurably tragic. But there are many exceptions. Such films as *The Last Drop of Water*, *The Long Road* and *Death's Marathon* leave the viewer in a mixed state of mind, with a sense of life tentatively picking up again after a catastrophe. Some films even have a bitter flavor: *A Corner in Wheat*, with its vicious circle of poverty; *In the Season of Buds*, where lives are racked by a lost opportunity; the starkness of *Just Gold*, foreshadowing Stroheim's *Greed*; and *Olaf—An Atom* (May 1913), whose outsider-hero

shares the same fate as the Seven Samurai without their companionship. Even the films with happy endings are rarely escapist in the usual sense: they are rooted in contemporary life and deal with such problems as poverty and unemployment (*The Musketeers of Pig Alley*; *In the Watches of the Night*; *Bobby, the Coward*—July 1911; *His Mother's Son*, etc.) or marital difficulties (*The Crooked Road*; *Brutality*; *The One She Loved*; *Death's Marathon*; *The Mothering Heart*, etc.).

I don't want to claim too much for Griffith's short films, which were turned out at tremendous speed to provide easy entertainment. But the question remains: Why do such films still have the power to move and fascinate us today?

In a way, the conditions of film-making in the early 1900s were most favorable to talent. Although in the later Biograph years Griffith came under fire from some reviewers, he did not have to face the volume of criticism that pours forth on any commercial film-maker today. Similarly, the reluctance of the Biograph management to allow such "novelties" as the two-reeler was a minor frustration compared to the detailed studio controls of later years. Commercial film-making could still mean freedom and spontaneity.

In fact, there were advantages to the sheer speed with which the Biograph films had to be made. Griffith had no chance to overpolish a film or lose interest in it; instead, he could make full use of his excellent intuition and visual sense. Even the most stogy and stilted of his earliest films—*The Cricket on the Hearth* (May 1909), *The Sealed Room* (September 1909), *The Expiation* (October 1909)—have bursts of life.<sup>9</sup> Another benefit of rapid production was the sense of unity and concentration which could pervade a film shot entirely within one or two days. Of course, this benefit was available to all film-makers of the period; but when added to Griffith's other advantages, it helped to impart unusual intensity to his short films.

*In The Unchanging Sea (1909) the rolling ocean suggests both the time and the space that separates the wife (Linda Arvidsen) from her shipwrecked husband.*



## 4

However much Griffith may have chafed against the constraint of the one-reeler, few of his films made in that format seem too short or perfunctory. There *are* inadequacies in the temporal structure—in *As It Is In Life*, for example, the widower's decision to give up the woman he loves take place in an unnaturally swift soliloquy; in *The Last Drop of Water*, The husband dies nobly of thirst in far too short a screen time—but these are quite incidental: both films cited contain diegetic lapses of years which are fully acceptable within their 15 real-time minutes.

In fact, many of Griffith's best short films encompass wide spans of diegetic time. *The Unchanging Sea*, *In the Season of Buds*, *The Long Road* all involve the passage of many years, and yet their drama is no less sharp and absorbing than that of *The Lonedale Operator*, which observes strict temporal unity. Other films, in theory, strain at the limits of the one-reeler by ranging widely through space—*The Fugitive* with its alternation between Union and Confederate homes; *The Lady and the Mouse* with its leap from village store to rich man's garden party—but these contrasts, too, serve to intensify the drama: the former, which obviously foreshadows the pairing of the families in *Birth of a Nation*, retains its own distinctive impact.

The brevity of the Biograph films accentuates Griffith's two crucial—and complementary—qualities. First, there is his strong sense of the concreteness of things: I have already mentioned the planes of depth in his long shots, the solid spatial structure implied by his editing, and the tactility of his objects. Second, there is his equally strong sense of the fragile and the fugitive: idyllic opening scenes that quickly become invaded or threatened, as in *The Country Doctor*, *A Feud in the Kentucky Hills* (October 1912), *Brutality* and *A Timely Interception* (June 1913); the rapid passing of time and the dynamic contrasts of place and mood, mentioned above; and his predilection for visual suggestions of impermanence, from wind, water and passers-by to the pigeons of *As It Is In Life*. When these two

opposing tendencies clash and intermingle, as in the best of the Biograph films, they generate sparks which flash a brief but intense light on the human condition.

In progressing to longer films, Griffith tried at first to simply extend the style of his one-reelers. But the tension would not hold: one or other of the two complementary qualities began to predominate. In the two-reel *Battle of Elderbush Gulch* it is the fluid and fugitive element which takes command: near the beginning, when the stage coach brings Mae Marsh to the western town, Griffith's camera eye is already darting here and there among the different townsfolk; later, when the Indians attack, the film breaks into a cascade of barely connected action scenes, and the sense of an underlying spatial structure is lost. Conversely, it is the static sense which obtrudes in the two-reel *Pueblo Legend*. Despite passages of violent action, the film contains too many hieratic tableaux and lingering fades.

In the four-reel *Judith of Bethulia* (March 1914; filmed 1913), firm structure has hypertrophied even further. The recurrent use of the same settings, rapid and adroit in most one-reelers, expands here to the point of tedium. One such setting is a long shot down the main street of Bethulia: it has impressive depth, and Griffith makes skillful use of big crowds or small groups of people ranging from foreground or far-off background. Yet each shot is held so long that its structural relation with the other settings dissolves, and the viewer aches for a change of scene.

With the transition from one-reelers to longer films, Griffith faced a challenge comparable to that posed by the advent of sound. In the end, of course, he learned how to meet that challenge; but to do so he had to relinquish some of the specific achievements of his early Biograph films. *The Fugitive*, *In the Season of Buds* and others have an unforced richness and intensity which neither Griffith nor anyone else could stretch across an hour or more of running time. *Intolerance* was Griffith's last grand attempt to do so, and though frequently rich and intense, it can hardly be called unforced.

Griffith's Biograph films survive, while the

more ambitious stage melodramas of the era—the best work of such playwrights as George Broadhurst, Eugene Walter and Charles Klein—are remembered only by the student of theatrical history. Aside from quality, one basic difference separates the plays from the films: the former exist only in the skeletal form of the script, which for revival would have to be filtered through modern, alien sensibilities; the latter still carry the visual flesh and blood of their own time. It is this richness of texture which sustains the other qualities of Griffith—and which, in so doing, offers to film theorists both a proving ground and a challenge.

The dominant lines of film theory today, from auteurism to Marxism, rely on extensive and detailed textual analysis, for which one prerequisite is the ability to see accurately what the film comprises. Most films analyzed are sound features running at least 75 minutes, and are therefore far more texturally complex than Griffith's one-reelers. Yet the latter already resist easy analysis. As I indicated earlier (in discussing the cuts on action in *The Lonedale Operator* and the reverse-angle cuts in *The Fugitive*) the basic syntax cannot be read without exceptional care; as to content, even the central diegetic events may be elusive.<sup>10</sup> If the textual analysts were to check out their methods on these "simple" films, they might gain a better idea of the level of accuracy required to support a general theory.

Of course, complete accuracy is neither possible nor desirable: a film carries too much

information for a useful transcription to include more than a tiny part. The analyst must be selective, using intuition or some kind of preconception as to what is significant. Yet in current film theories, the discrepancy between information and preconception can become a complete gulf. The auteurist who tries to relate too many of the elements in a film directly to its maker may end up eliminating or distorting those which don't fit—and also, to strengthen his case, may minimize the auteur's diversity. Structuralists and Marxists often play the same game in a more grandiose arena, with the human psyche or society taking over the omnipotent role of the auteur, and with preconceptions elevated from guidelines to exclusive laws. As a result, textual analysis often becomes an exercise in question-begging—but because a full-length feature calls for such drastic simplification, it is almost impossible to amend the analysis without begging some different question. In place of full-length features, such brief but impressive films as Griffith's one-reelers would allow a clearer appraisal of the different theories and their assumptions.

For one thing, it would at once become clear that the choice of film is crucial. The same analytic method, when applied to different Biograph films, could demonstrate that Griffith was primarily a technical innovator, a social reformer, a sentimentalist, a bourgeois exploiter. Those of us who might accept *The Young Mr. Lincoln* as typical not merely of John Ford but of American film-making between the world wars would be much more inclined to reject the equivalence of *A Corner of Wheat*, *In the Season of Buds*, *The Informer* or *The Lonedale Operator*. As to the analysis itself, the brevity of the one-reelers, along with their relatively small range of characters and locations, would militate against the omission of too much "irrelevant" or "insignificant" detail. In short, it is difficult to describe a Griffith film in a format longer than a plot synopsis without revealing the wide diversity of forces that shaped it—notably chance, technical considerations, and Griffith's own predilections, in addition to the cultural attitudes of his time, place and background.

*In The Lonedale Operator (1911) the railroad tracks effectively link the lovers (Blanche Sweet, Frank Grandin) with the everyday world of work.*



I set out to check certain assumptions about Griffith against his early work that has now become more readily accessible, and have found that most of them need qualification. I have also found that the Biograph films raise theoretical questions which, after two thirds of a century, still await answers. In my mind, there is no doubt that these films demand serious critical study—at the same time as they offer a rich and varied source of enjoyment.

## NOTES

1. And yet, remarkably, all except about eight are known to have survived.
2. I have distilled them from a wide selection of books and articles, without any deliberate attempt at exaggeration. I do not pretend that my critique is in any way daring or original. The assumptions have often been challenged in the past: to give just one example, Edward Wagenknecht in *The Movies in the Age of Innocence* (Ballantine 1962) declares that the years during which Griffith made his one-reelers were his "most richly creative period." Nevertheless, the assumptions still persist.
3. Provided, of course, that it was not excessively skewed by the method of selection. MOMA's Associate Curator of Film, Eileen Bowser, who was in charge of the program, tells me that (a) the 1908 films were viewed by graduate film student Tom Gunning, who chose those he judged most important; (b) for the later Biograph films, apart from those already available, the descriptive notes in the Biograph Bulletins served as the basis for selection, with the cast or the interest of the synopsis as typical criteria ("Sometimes we were surprised," commented Ms. Bowser); and (c) the final selection was also influenced by the physical condition of the negative, which varied greatly from film to film. In short, while the program was not a random cross-section of Griffith's early work, neither was it rigorously confined to his best or most original films.

The unevenness of quality in the MOMA selection compensated to some extent for an understandable but regrettable omission. Full appreciation of Griffith's achievement in his early work requires a direct comparison with other films made at the same time, and I hope that any future retrospective will include a representative selection at least from the U.S. Despite this omission, the extensive MOMA program allowed some generalizations about Griffith to be made with confidence.

4. The date given in parentheses after each title is that of the film's release. In most cases, release dates follow shooting dates by one to two months.

5. There is a lengthy establishing pan at the beginning of *The Greatest Question* (1919) but it has nothing like the same impact as in *The Country Doctor*.

6. A statistical sidelight on the melodramatic element in Griffith: of 84 one- and two-reelers on which my notes are sufficiently detailed, at least 65 involve the threat or reality of physical violence. More specifically, 44 involve the threatened or actual use of firearms—which, in 18 of the films, are handled by ordinary, noncriminal civilians.

7. And women, too—such as the socially conscious playwright Rachel Crothers. In *He And She* (1911) she presents a husband and wife who are both sculptors; they enter a contest which, much to his chagrin, she wins. So far, so feminist. But then, with her daughter in difficulties, the wife decides that motherhood comes first and withdraws from the contest in favor of her husband.

8. *D.W. Griffith: The Years at Biograph* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970).

9. The most ludicrous of these is *The Sealed Room*. Set in a vaguely medieval period, it concerns a king who, discovering that the queen is in love with a minstrel, walls them up in a chamber. Most of the action consists of *film d'art*-style posturing; but a genuine sense of drama arises when Griffith cross-cuts between the horrified couple on one side of the wall and the laughing king on the other.

10. One example. At the climax of *A Country Cupid*, the village halfwit is menacing the schoolteacher with a gun. She manages to get the gun away from him just before her boyfriend comes to the rescue. Not until the fourth viewing did I notice that when the teacher takes the gun, the halfwit begs her to shoot him—which considerably alters the psychological implications of the scene.

---

## Film Books from University of California Press

JEAN RENOIR, by Raymond Durnat \$16.50  
OZU: HIS LIFE AND FILMS, by Donald Richie \$14.50

KULESHOV ON FILM, tr. by Ron Levaco \$10.00  
(paper, \$3.45)

SIXGUNS AND SOCIETY: A STRUCTURAL STUDY  
OF THE WESTERN, by Will Wright \$10.00